

Q: Commander Bill Scallion for the Naval Historical Center, Washington, D. C. and Jerry Green for the National Park Service, USS Arizona Memorial at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu Hawaii on December 6, 2001 at six-forty P.M. The person being interviewed is Edmond Torkel Esping who was a seaman second class on the USS West Virginia on December 7, 1941. Is that information correct, Mr. Esping?

**Esping:** Pardon?

Q: Is that information correct?

**Esping:** It's all straight news.

Q: Okay. For the record, sir, would you please state your full name, place of birth and date of birth?

**Esping:** Well, you got all of that.

Q: Yeah, but I'd like to hear it from you.

**Esping:** Oh, well, I was born January 18, 1920.

Q: Where were you born?

**Esping:** In the bedroom.

Q: Where was the bedroom located? In the house.

**Esping:** In the house, yes. <laughs> House at the farm, yes. Yeah, well, no. It was uhm.. that's what it was, though. At that time they didn't have too many hospitals and Dad says, "Oh, well, Mom don't care. So we'll just do it," uhm.. everything went fine.

Q: So where was the farm located?

**Esping:** Three and a half miles north of Minaota [ph?] on Highway 3.

Q: And what did you consider to be your hometown in 1941?

**Esping:** Minaota.

Q: Minaota, okay.

**Esping:** That's where I go back to if I went-- went back.

Q: Okay. What were your parent's names?

**Esping:** Torkel and Katie Esping.

Q: And did you have any-- go ahead.

**Esping:** That's Tor-- Torkelo [ph?] Esping and should be for all of them like his dad.

Q: Okay. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

**Esping:** Sister, yeah, I had one brother.

Q: Okay. Do you recall his name-- what was his name?

**Esping:** Donald.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

**Esping:** Minaota.

Q: Minaota. Okay, here's the good one. Where and why did you enlist?

**Esping:** Because all my buddies was goin' to the service and dammit, I started to cry because I can't do anything and I wanna get in there and respect the flag.

Q: Okay. When did you enlist?

**Esping:** Uhm.. I-- well, I have it on the tip of my tongue.

Q: We can start with the year.

**Esping:** Sorry about that.

Q: That's okay.

**Esping:** Oh, darn it. Maybe this'll help. Nothing like having a drink, you know? September 17, 1940. I was only a kid.

Q: How old were you when you enlisted?

**Esping:** Oh, I was about 20.

Q: Okay.

**Esping:** They said, "You ain't of age." Well, I says, "I will be just a little while." So, "Okay," he says, "Well let you go through." But he says, "Remember, you get into trouble we know nothing about it." <laughs> Yeah.

Q: How did you get onboard the West Virginia, I know, the brow.

**Esping:** I walked onboard.

Q: All right.

**Esping:** No, it was-- I come out of Birmingham-- not Birmingham-- out of the training camp.

Q: San Diego?

**Esping:** Uh.. Chicago.

Q: Oh, okay.

**Esping:** And uhm.. by the way, I was in the choir there, 200 voices. One of the world's best.

Q: Tenor or bass?

**Esping:** Tenor or better?

Q: Tenor or bass? What did you sing? What part?

**Esping:** Tenor.

Q: Tenor, okay.

**Esping:** Certainly it wasn't soprano.

Q: I almost said it but I didn't do it.

**Esping:** <laughs> Yeah, I had five records cut that they sent home with me.

Q: Okay.

**Esping:** I don't know. I think the kids went to work and busted 'em up because I don't seem to can find 'em but then that's water over the dam but I thought it'd be nice to have some for the grandkids if there was any. And you see, my wife is from Australia or was from Australia, Brisbane, the Queenstown.

Q: Were you married at the time of December 7<sup>th</sup> or was that afterwards.

**Esping:** No, no, no, I didn't get married until-- in June I think it was.

Q: But it was after December 7<sup>th</sup>?

**Esping:** I had an uncle from Chicago that was there with his camera and he took the whole wedding. I've got it now unless they've throwed that out, too. I don't know see I have no property anymore. They sold it off to pay my bill at that nursing home, so uhm.. \_\_\_\_\_ only.

Q: But you have some knowledge we'd like to get from you anyway because that's valuable to is.

**Esping:** Well, it don't cost anything to give you that. <laughs>

Q: So before December 7<sup>th</sup> you got to the West Virginia, right?

**Esping:** December 7<sup>th</sup>, oh, I was in the navy for quite a while.

Q: Okay. What division did you work on in the West Virginia?

**Esping:** Fifth division and then I was also on the weather division.

Q: And what were your duties? What kind of duties did you do?

**Esping:** Well, the fifth division, that was just work keeping the place clean and such but then uhm.. this thing don't work too good.

Q: Said about the weather division.

**Esping:** Yeah, oh, yeah, we uh.. would be way up there in the main top 108 feet off the water and uhm.. we'd be checking wind pressures uh.. directions, clouds, how far the horizon was. Supposed to be 24 miles, you know. Well, that's- that's when you stand down on the deck of the ship I found out later. <laughs>

Q: Let me ask you a question I've been asking a number of people, Saturday, December 6<sup>th</sup>, do you remember what you were doing the day before Pearl Harbor?

**Esping:** December 6<sup>th</sup>, that would be a Saturday. Just taking it easy, went ashore.

Q: You went ashore?

**Esping:** Um-hum.

Q: Any idea where you went?

**Esping:** No, went into little Wimpy's and the pool hall. Well, you- you had a hole in the wall for beer see, and that was usually wind up waiting in line, waiting to get their beers, oh, boy. And he sold it cheaper than anybody else and I'll tell you one thing, you can get just as Goddamn drunk on that cheap beer that you could on any other. <laughs>

Q: Was Wimpy's the West Virginia bar or was that just a general bar?

**Esping:** Kind of a general. There was no- no cooking or anything going on in there. It was a pretty good- pretty good. Oh, hell, that was in Honolulu. All right. Is it still there?

Q: I don't now. That may be something--

**Esping:** I know there was an awful lot of people that would go in and out.

Q: Well, let me ask you that Mr. Esping, this is the first time you've been back to Honolulu since December 7<sup>th</sup>, is that correct?

**Esping:** 60 years.

Q: Sixty years, okay, well, you got some exploring to do.

**Esping:** Well, I'm- I'm- I'm striking for year uh.. another 60.

Q: Okay.

**Esping:** This is, kind of, fun. Let's- let's have some more fun.

Q: Sounds good. So I gather you got back to the ship a little late.

**Esping:** No.

Q: What time is the liberty boat running?

**Esping:** <clears throat> Midnight.

Q: Okay. So you got back to the ship, no problem?

**Esping:** I was back about nine o'clock.

Q: Okay.

**Esping:** I felt something was starting to work on me and I thought, "Let's get out of here," because the MPs would come along and they'd each take an arm, you know, and then they'd drag you if nothing else. They get ya home.  
<coughs>

Q: Let's go to December 7<sup>th</sup> then, what's the first thing you remember of significance on December 7<sup>th</sup>?

**Esping:** It was about eight o'clock the uh.. the church parties was on one end of the fantail and then up forward of it more was- was the swimming crew-- peoples and uhm.. the- the uhm.. he had to blow on the uh.. uh.. the whistle on the uh.. \_\_\_\_\_ board but they had told me before, he says, "Soldier, you can take that hose and go up to the- up to the folks all up there at the bough and water it down." Well, I was tugging on this damn hose, you know, when you get about 150 feet of it because the- the boards they dry out and then they spread, then you can't get the clamp on 'em and then they rot. So I was pulling on them-- pulling them and all I had to do was one more pull, you know, and I'd be in business. But I happened to look west and there was two planes coming and they were coming at an angle. I couldn't see their insignias but I thought to myself, "This don't look right. What in the hell is them big, round things underneath?" They were only flying about this far off the water, four feet, because I suppose then they could drop the torpedoes, see. But they were torpedoes and I'll tell you, they ripped a couple a hell of a holes. So uhm.. I didn't know what to do. Then I heard this phew, phew, phew and I thought, "This ain't no place for me." So I headed over to the- the uh.. the big log sticking out that they tie the boats to-- the boat boom and uhm.. I thought, "Well, if anything else I can do I'll just crawl under that. I don't think anything should hurt me." Well, I happened to look up and there was somethin' coming down at me and I thought, "Well, now, I'll just sneak under there a little closer," and about that time zip goes the pants. Well, he didn't draw blood but he sure made a mess of my trousers. So then from there about at that time then the-- be-- but uhm.. when I seen them planes I yelled real loud, "Planes, planes, planes," and all the activity what was being done stopped and they tore into the rest of it they had been trained for. And uhm.. well, I don't know how many people on the backend got- got shot but I uhm.. thought, "Well, I better get down in the water there and help them guys out," because they had these big- big-- you remember them life-- round lifesavers or whatever you call 'em.

Q: Life ring.

**Esping:** But you know, the damn fools they didn't-- couldn't swim, you know, and what do they do, just like a bunch of sheep. The whole works goes in at once and I told 'em, I said, "Now- now, if you guys were smart you'd grab each other and, kind of, help along and then grab that rope on that thing and

pedal yourself ashore." Well, I don't know whether they did or not. There was about 10 or 12 of them and I thought, "Well, I'd better get outta here." There were a couple of guys that had a hold of me and I tell you if you ever had eagle claws, oh, that hurt.

Q: Where were you when these guys were grabbing onto you? Was that on the deck or down on the--

**Esping:** I was uhm.. I was in the water then. See, what I did, I got down on the armor belt and I jumped and doggonit I hit it and didn't feel so good. I chipped- chipped a- a hipbone there. Well, anyhow I-- that's when I was trying to get 'em all together and in the meantime I happened to look up along board ship there and there was a guy standing up there and he had-- on the armor belt of the Tennessee beating his head against the damn bulkhead, blood squirtin' out his ears and I tell, you know, you get, kind of, feel-- funny feeling. And I thought, well, so I turned around and I looked at these guys and there was two of them that had grabbed me and I thought, "There's only one way to do this," so I took a-- oil running down, you know, I took a good deep breath and I made myself heavy. You can do that, you know, and down I slid. Well, they didn't all come down with me, so I thought, "Well, that's nice now." So uhm.. then I got down for a ways and I thought, "This better be enough," so then I started swimming. I didn't- didn't know which direction I was goin'. Lo and behold if I didn't hit the damn Tennessee right square in the head and that, kind of, dazed me a little bit. And I thought, "Well, we gotta- we gotta keep moving." So I started swimming up and I got up to the bow and them two foul [ph?] chains there in front, you know, to keep the logs and stuff away so they don't hit the after. <coughs> I was standing there hangin' on to that gettin' my breath out, just gettin' to feel, kind of, happy and I thought-- then I happened to look up to the west and there was another Goddamn plane coming. Well, I thought, "This ain't no place for me." So I hurried up and I got past the bow there and trying to keep afloat, you know, and just about that time, plop, plop, plop, if I'd have been hanging onto them chains I'd a been goin' headfirst that way. So uh.. then the- the war was, kind of, dying down a little bit. I thought, "Well, maybe I better try and get ashore," so I started to swim for shore and in the meantime the uh.. the soldiers had took fire hoses, them three entrance, you know, out front <coughs> and threw them over the side for us to get a hold of to get up and they had to stake them. And uh.. oh, that was some slippery junk, all that oil on 'em and if they'd have put water on them first, you know, that oil wouldn't have stuck so good. Well, I'll tell you what that- that line-- the shore line on top of it about that high. Well, you know, you're standing

there and I think you took three strokes before you moved a couple of inches, you know, and I finally got out to where I could move a little bit on some of the dirt and all of that and uh.. I got up to the top. I was all- all in. I didn't have much I had left for nothin'. So I looked around and I thought, "Well, boy, there's a good hiding place." It's that great big cactus patch there on Ford Island. And they told me afterwards that even a rabbit don't go in there, and I went in there just like a bullet, they said. Well, I tell you why I went so fast was because that plane that was up to my-- he crashed right over there about 50 feet from me. After he had left the Goddamn-- this other fellow was a friend of mine and he says, "There was a hole about ten inches in diameter and he's about a foot deep," machine gun bullets. So evidently they had hit him and he froze at the trigger. Well, then I uhm.. made it in uh.. it was, kind of, sticky all right but I was standing there and there was knives, oh, I felt so comfortable and all of a sudden slash, slash, slash. Some of the sailors they would come in there with machetes and was chopping the cactus off and they brought a- they brought a board in and they strapped me on it. Of course, they didn't want me dragging on the ground of that damn cactus, oh, they were terrible. You could see it's the cactus from Tennes-- uh.. Texas and Wyo-- not Wyoming uh.. down there another--

Q: Arizona?

**Esping:** Uh.. Arizona, yeah. <cough> And they are some brutes that'll go up higher than that. I'll tell you that. Well, any how they-- they uh.. yeah, they strapped me in that thing and they says, "Well, we're ready to move." And I walked right out of it. He said, "What's he goin'?" "Oh," I says, "This ain't no place for me." He started laughing. The other guys said, "Oh, I'll fix 'em." So he- he took out of there and he come back with some two inch strap. Well, they- they worked but I stretched 'em somethin' terrible but they got me down in the basement of the uh.. one of the soldier's homes, officers is what they were. and they- they threwed a- a sheet out and uh.. laid me on it. Oh, it was that cold down there and then they went around to some of the other houses and gathered up a bunch of ice cubes and they put a- put another sheet over me and then they poured them on the top of me. Well, it was, kind of, comical in about five minutes. Here was coming streams of smoke up. Well, it was steam, you know, because I was so hot from that oil and-- well, that, kind of, blowed over and then the firing, kind of, quit. There was a couple of guys went up and checked things out and he says, "I think we can move." He says, "We can move him." And then after that I was in five different uh.. auxiliary uh.. places for checkin' out. And I finally ended up down in the- the uh.. servants guys quarters. Boy that was a big booth there,

you know the-- where you sat the seats were that wide and they just laid us on there and throwed the blanket over us and walked away. Of course, if I needed medicine why then they- they put a doctor to you. <coughs> Well, then there was another wave that, kind of, come through and-- but then as you-- they cooled that in a hurry. So I laid there for a while and then it was, kind of, quiet. Oh, couple of guys talking, "We gotta get up to the small stores. We gotta get some clothes." I know mine was all burnt up, well, theirs, too and the navy is supposed to furnish you clothes after being in battle like that. Well, I never did get 'em but a bunch of the boys got together and they each one took a little out of the locker of theirs and give it to me. Well, that was nice. I appreciated that but sometime one of 'em had a little more smaller size than I did. Well, anyhow then they were gonna go ashore. I was able to walk but I wasn't- wasn't any speed demon and uhm.. I says, "Hey," I says, "Do you mind if I go with you?" "No, come on. Come on." Well, went up to the store because I wanted to get a different pair of trousers. We got some stuff and we was comin' back. That's when the lightening struck again in that cane field that-- right beside there. The Japs were in there and they was shootin' at us and I said to the guys, I said, "Hit the ground." So we did. Then they quit. Well, they had all their groceries and everything and we got back- we got back to the barracks. I- I call it the barracks because that's where our home was at the time and uh.. I was gettin', kind of, tired. I figured I better sit down and-- well, I laid down. I passed out and when I woke up there was a couple of nurses and couple of doctors and all. There was all kinds of help around and I says, "What's the matter?" "Oh," he says, "You're awake now, hunh?" "Well, I hope--" I said, "I hope so." So then it was-- I don't- I don't recall how long I was in that thing but they did get me back to uh.. uh.. barracks and they-- it- it wasn't too long and they put me back on a ship and we got out to sea. Oh, yes, it was the USS Chicago, heavy cruiser.

Q: So that's where you went back to sea on the Chicago?

**Esping:** Yes, so we went back out to sea.

Q: Was this December 7<sup>th</sup>, or was this later?

**Esping:** No. This was later. See, I was gettin' healed up, you know.

Q: How long were you in the hospital?

**Esping:** Well, it was about a week there then I know for sure. But then, of course, I was moving around, so I wasn't-- well, there they go and uhm.. well, then it was, "We're gonna send you off on another ship."

Q: Okay. But I want to bring you back on December 7<sup>th</sup>.

**Esping:** Well, this is- this is about a week at least later, see?

Q: Okay.

**Esping:** And then uhm.. I went back on the-- I went on the Chicago and then down through the South Pacific. Now, down in New Zealand.

Q: Well, again, I just want to come back to the 7<sup>th</sup> for you, okay?

**Esping:** Oh, well, uhm.. there wasn't much goin' on after I left there as far as I was concerned.

Q: I wanted to ask you about the 7<sup>th</sup> because did you have any friends that you lost on the West Virginia?

**Esping:** I might have had a couple of friends because I never seen anymore of 'em.

Q: Now, what's your biggest memory about December 7<sup>th</sup>? What's the most vivid memory?

**Esping:** Cheating the Japs out of my life.

Q: What's the best memory you have of the West Virginia?

**Esping:** Up on the \_\_\_\_\_ deck. I was gonna spray her down, that was my orders.

Q: I just mean in general about the West Virginia. Did you have any good memory that really connects you to that ship?

**Esping:** Mess cooking. <laughs> And they-- we- we fed 2,300 men, so then I got to be a mess cook. Oh, God, I found out what them devils go through. Oh, it was more in fun than anything, so uhm..

Q: We got a couple of more questions.

**Esping:** Okay.

Q: I wondered if you happened to see what was going on, on the Arizona on that day?

**Esping:** No, no. I tell you, I was in a damn pool of oil that I couldn't see hardly anything. Boy, that stuff smarts in the eyeballs.

Q: Were you aware of the explosions on the Arizona?

**Esping:** Seems to me I heard 'em because I seen that plane going along and he, kind of, raise for this one stack and then I see the big, black ball go down and he slid over to the other one and the same thing. And then he went up. I suppose he went to strafing and killing, you know. But uhm.. it wasn't too long and poom, she opened up. She then went clear down to the fire pots, the steam boilers <coughs> boy, oh, boy I don't know <coughs>. You know, after- after oh I don't know, 60 years it's, kind of, hard to remember some of that stuff but I have to dream as I go along. Put two and two together and you'll get four. Not five but four.

Q: Is there any other particular memory of December 7<sup>th</sup> you want to make sure that we know about?

**Esping:** No, I was chief operator over all the operations that I did. <coughs> But no, well, that clothes business was about the only thing that I can remember of any decency. There's always plenty of, you know, that mushy stuff goin' around.

Q. Just out of curiosity how did your parents find out about whether or not you had survived Pearl Harbor?

**Esping:** It was on the radio.

Q: The navy was able to get the information--

**Esping:** Well, they- they got their men out, you know, for \_\_\_\_\_ that's how they got it and uhm.. I didn't write a letter for, oh, hell it must have been three weeks or a month before I wrote a letter to 'em and then they went to work and they- they- they read the dumb thing and she cut out a whole bunch of stuff, you know, that I didn't think would amount to anything but it must have to them because I got-- that was about another month later I got a- a letter from 'em and they says, "Why did you have to get everything cut out of it?" Well, pretty hard to- to explain. <laughs>

Q: Mr. Esping, we want to thank you for your service and for your time tonight. We really appreciate.

**Esping:** Well, anytime, anytime. This is, kind of, fun in a way.

Q: Well, good.

**Esping:** That sun should set pretty soon, shouldn't it?

Q: I think we can take care of that right now. Thanks a lot, sir.

**Esping:** You bet, you bet. I was just wondering if they were gonna get at me because what was that, two days ago?

Q: Yeah.

**Esping:** \_\_\_\_\_ they wanted to interview me that night and--

#### End of Tape 420 Edmond Torkel Esping ####

